

## FIVE FATAL MISTAKES ABOUT SOVIET AIMS

by Gerhart Niemeyer

The phenomenon of the Soviet regime has puzzled the world from the beginning. In general one could observe two patterns of thought about the Soviet regime: those who did not understand at all, who believed Communists to be progressives or advocates of justice; and those who described the Soviet reality correctly but followed up their description with soft conclusions. A third group both grasped Communist irrationality and also saw little chance that this kind of mentality would mend itself. But compared with the other two, this third was a tiny group that yielded little public influence.

It has been erroneous thinking about Marxism-Leninism and its regime that has accounted for all policy mistakes toward Soviet Russia, beginning with those other Russian revolutionary parties who decided they could trust the Communists as partners in a common cause, only to dig their own grave.

Five major mistakes have been endemic to Western thinking about the Soviets:

**Mistake One:** We tend to concede a considerable measure of success to Soviet Russia: "Things are much better there"—better than ten, twenty, thirty years ago, better even than before the Revolution, indeed, better than ever. In other words, Soviet Russia, product of the Communist Revolution, is a success. Right?

Wrong! Have the Communists attained their goal: "An association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"? (*Communist Manifesto*) Have they brought about a "human emancipation"? Have they eliminated oppression? Have they taken the fetters from human creativity? Russia under Soviet rule is a dismal failure of a country, economically, politically, above all, culturally and spiritually. That rule has turned out to be the *via dolorosa* of the Russian people.

Measured by ordinary standards of what we call, maybe presumptuously, successful human living, no success can be detected in Russia. If, however, we look just



at the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), that small, tight-knit organization which came to power in 1917, we must call it astonishingly successful. That, of course, means judging the party by its own standards rather than by general human standards of value.

The party weathered the death of its founder and leader. It survived the Stalin regime that would have brought to bankruptcy any other party in the rest of the world. It engaged in official de-Stalinization without losing its unity and energy. After Stalin, other party autocrats have come and gone, but the party is still there. The party has practiced on its subject people propaganda which is now universally discredited. But the party is still there. "Still there" means that it has continued in its original design, a small, highly disciplined group with quasi-military cohesion and centralized leadership.

The CPSU sees itself, moreover, as the bearer of a worldwide mission. It claims authority not merely among Russians, or citizens of the Soviet Union, but among

Communists and socialists all over the world. No matter that this claim can be enforced only in the presence of Soviet-Russian means of power. The Soviet "advisers" who pop up whenever a Communist or "sympathizing" group outside Russia has shown strength, are not primarily Russians. They are, above all, experienced and committed Communists serving the universal goals of the CPSU. Wherever, outside of Russia, Communists are politically or militarily successful, a regime resembling that of the Soviet Union will be established. All other Communist parties must be in possession of the same kind of "hegemony."

We shall come back to the CPSU later. Meanwhile, let us look at the economy. The failure of the Soviet economy has become a commonplace to the extent of being represented by the well-known joke that, if the Soviets would take over the Sahara, in ten years there would be a shortage of sand. Shortages in the Soviet economy are endemic; no amount of planning has been able to eliminate them. Their system of cost-accounting has been in a hopeless mess from the beginning, nor have some experiments with limited market relations within the system brought any relief. Advanced technology is physically imported, only often to rust in the fields, for lack of skilled personnel. Research and development are woefully un-

derfinanced. The inability of the once so eminently productive Russian agriculture to feed its own people has now become an officially acknowledged fact of Soviet life.

**Mistake Two: Well, we tend to conclude, if the Soviet economy is in such bad shape and gives no promise of real improvement, the Soviet leaders certainly will be compelled to come to terms with reality. In other words, they will have to become responsible statesmen. Right?**

Wrong! When we are talking of "the Soviet economy" we refer to the civil, or consumer economy which indeed is functioning on only two cylinders. Besides the consumer economy, however, there is a Soviet military economy, and it is moving at high speed and with great energy. A far greater amount of Soviet resources, in relative terms, is allocated to the military economy than in the West. More than double the amount of funding than in the West supports Soviet military R & D. Here we find invention, efficiency, high productivity, excellent management.

Well, the argument would continue, if Soviet management can do this in the military economy it will be easy for them to transfer their know-how also to the civilian economy. Indeed, they might be able. If, however, they are in fact not doing it, that is because they simply do not think in such a manner. The "arming of the revolution" has been a basic commitment of Marxism-Leninism from very early on. "Guns and butter" is a formula that simply would not occur to a Communist mind. Guns spell survival of the party; that survival is guaranteed by means of force. Consumer goods and military needs will never be allowed to compete with each other.

Nor should one be tempted to read into that analysis the likelihood of a military coup at some time in the future. In other countries, the military might well be the sole representative of potential order, when civic bonds of allegiance crumble. In the Soviet Union, the party was founded, organized, and led by Lenin using military language and breathing a military spirit. The party is a civil organization designed to wage a "protracted war." It sees itself as a force "surrounded on all sides by more powerful enemies," a detachment "crossing a swamp on a narrow causeway," with a mission to "conquer a strong fortress." The party is organized like an army, with power flowing from the highest leader down, and with strongly centralized leadership. This party, which demands from its members a commitment to continuous activity under orders, maintains a network of political officers in all units of the Soviet armed forces.

Under such circumstances, a purely military allegiance is unlikely to take shape. Some top commanding officers may come away from a war with more glory than is good for their ego; those have always been quietly removed. The sole condition in which military leaders might decide to take control in the Soviet Union would be a political

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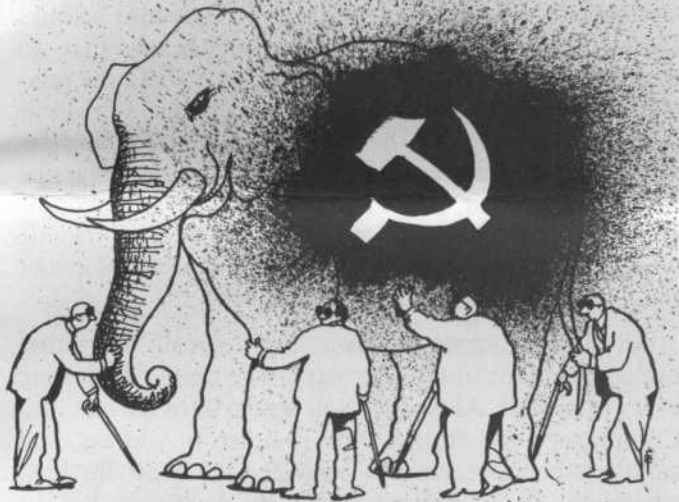
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Gerhart Niemeyer's previous *Imprimis* paper, "The Loss and Recovery of History," is collected into the new Hillsdale anthology, *Self-Defense Manual for the War of Ideas*. His 1983 lecture "Augustine's Political Philosophy?" appears in our book, *The Christian Vision: Man in Society*. To order either volume, write Hillsdale College Press, Hillsdale, MI 49242.



vacuum left by the party, if party factions confronted each other so that no party leadership could emerge. That kind of situation, however, would probably result in a number of warlords, each ruling his own territory.

This brings us back again to the party. Our dictionaries define a party as "a partial group competing among other partial groups to elect its candidate to office." By contrast, the CPSU looks on itself not as one of several competing groups but as the sole organization having a valid claim to power, and not as a part of a greater whole but



rather as that whole itself. Electing candidates is not its chief purpose, nor does it consider itself as representing any interest group. Hence...

**Mistake Three: We tend to forget that the CPSU, although it carries the name "party" to the point of pride where it is referred to simply as *The Party*, has nothing in common with parties operating in the politics of non-Communist countries.**

Lenin conceived it as a body of action required by the Communist ideology, so it represents the ideology rather than people. The one comparison that comes to mind is the Christian Church, formed by and for faith in Christ, representing that faith rather than particular groups of people. Indeed, the party has often been compared to a church or a priesthood. But that, too, is a mistake, as shall become clear later.

The Communist ideology appears to other people often as a set of ideas, resembling in kind any other set of ideas, as, for instance, liberal ideas, the beliefs of Christianity, the philosophy of Plato, the tenets of vegetarians. But Lenin said of the Communist ideology: "The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent because it is true." The use of the term "omnipotent" for a theory strikes us as odd. We use "omnipotent" to describe God. Lenin thus gives to a doctrine a divine attribute. Why? It can only be because he equates this set of ideas with the power of history, and history with divinity. No wonder he also said: "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary

movement." A third statement of Lenin completes the logic: "The *only* choice is: either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course." He is saying that history's power, the omnipotence of the ideology, has decreed an irreconcilable conflict with an "either-or" character. For a Communist, then, the ideology is *the* one real force of history, outranking every other historical element, and ordaining a war to the death between the Communist revolution and the bourgeois present society.

Lenin, however, hotly condemned any pedantic subservience to particular principles or concepts of the ideology. In fact, one Communist, in a memorable conversation with a Menshevik in 1928, stated his view of both party and ideology in quasi-religious terms: "The real Lenin was the man who had had the courage to make the proletarian revolution first, and then set about creating the objective conditions necessary as a preliminary to such a revolution. What was the October revolution, what indeed, the Communist Party, but a miracle...? The essential characteristic is that it is bounded by no laws, it is always extending the realm of the possible until nothing becomes impossible. Nothing is inadmissible for it, nothing unrealizable. For such a party a true Bolshevik will readily cast out from his mind ideas in which he has believed for years" (Leonard Shapiro, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, New York 1960, 381, reporting the words of Preobrazhenskii).

The party, then, is an agent which possesses the power of history but also works miracles of history, by temporarily suspending the "laws of history." We can put all this in terms of religious beliefs: History is divine; the ideology, being scientific knowledge of history's "laws," is omnipotent; and the party is divine because it can change and bend the "laws" of history. So the party is more than a church: it needs to be worshipped. Even today, when something spectacular is accomplished in the Soviet Union, something of the kind for which we here would give thanks to Almighty God, in Sovietland public thanks are offered to the party. Party and ideology thus form a single complex force which appears to Communists as endowed with the enduring power of truth, and yet flexible in the process of becoming. This combination of party and ideology is both defined and free, both human and divine. Communists look on it as something apart from which they cannot conceive living. It would be a mistake to call their relation to it faith, because faith is precisely what the ideology rejects on principle. If it is like a religion, it is all the same a perversion of religion in that it worships something human, which ought not to be worshipped.

One cannot look on the Communist Party as just another political organization, a part of the whole, competing with other parts. Rather, it claims to transcend not merely the political sphere, but also history. It functions, not as an auxiliary to government, but as an authority over government, indeed, as the authority over all other authorities.

For this reason, totalitarian parties, both fascist and communist, confer on their heads non-official titles of authority: *Duce*, *Fuehrer*, *Vozhd*. The party wields absolute authority even when it admits to having made mistakes. Similarly, the ideology is not just another set of ideas and beliefs but a knowledge that operates as supreme power in history and guarantees to Communists their eventual victory, even though the ideology may change and has been changed. Party and ideology form a unit: the ideology cannot differ from the party; the party embodies the ideology. Religion here has turned into politics.

**Mistake Four: Another misconception widely accepted is that Communists exalt the state.**

It is true that Communists have set up a state rule that endows the state with functions it does not have in other countries. Under Communist management, the state fixes all wages and prices, the quantity and the quality of goods to be produced. The state is the sole employer. The state manages and controls all publications. Education is a state monopoly, so are the arts, sports, entertainment, recreation. Religion is strictly controlled by the state. Internal movement is tightly regulated; external movement prohibited except by state authorization. Thus the state has indeed become "total,"—beside it there is no room for "society," i.e., for autonomous and spontaneous human relations and activities.

But when we see the state as the ultimate goal of all Communist aspirations, we are in error. The Communist vision of the future is a society without a state, or one in which the state has "withered away." One may say that that is what the ideology has said from Marx to Lenin to Khrushchev, but that in practice it has been forgotten or indefinitely postponed. That may well be so, yet we would still entertain a mistaken picture of Soviet reality. The Soviet state is organized pretty much as states are everywhere. Its government is divided into departments, or ministries, at the head of which is a minister responsible for his agency. Are the decisions of the ministry, then, made by the minister? No, in the Soviet Union all decisions are made by the Politburo which is a body of the party, not of the state. Every week, the Politburo takes something like 50-60 decisions. It then attributes each of these decisions to one of the various ministries by whom the decisions are published as if they had been made by the respective ministers.

No government official has something like a part of sovereign decision-making power. Rather, the sovereign is the party, while the state is something like a holding company. The Soviet system is run wholly by the party, or rather, by a miniscule body within the party. As soon as we scrutinize particular state functions we find that the state is not permitted to consider anything but the party's interests and objectives which, in turn, are motivated by the ideology. Thus the judiciary may not have in mind the higher meanings of the law but is supposed to be par-

tisan. They have a word for it, *partiinost*, meaning party-mindedness, party-consciousness, exclusive party-loyalty. The same is found in arts, sports, education. The party claims to be the highest and overriding norm for everything the state manages, directs, or regulates.

Interestingly, we find a close parallel in Nazi Germany, which was not so much a state-run as a party-run system. On every government level there was a paralleling party-organ, so that every state decision could be held to an obedient observance of the party's will.

This relationship of the state and the party is worth a great deal of reflection. Today, the idea of the state has lost most of its luster. We prefer not to mention it, to look in another direction. All the same, it is still true that the state is the sole organization of the whole of a given society. That is true notwithstanding obvious cases of discrimination, e.g., against slaves in ancient Greece, against serfs in the Middle Ages, against unassimilated minority groups in our times. The state represents the whole of society because it is oriented by a concept of "man." At any given time, that concept may have been drawn more narrowly than it should have been. Still, within the historically accepted boundaries of that concept, the state operates usually with the notion of "man" as its standard.

Totalitarian regimes are the first ones to impose on states the concept of an ideological objective in history, replacing the concept of man, so that under such parties the state is perverted into an instrument of ideological strategy, and loses the character of human representation. That is why totalitarian regimes are experienced above all as a rule of "falsehood," one that forces all subjects to lie in order to survive. Solzhenitsyn has insisted that living under a public falsehood is indeed worse than living under officially practiced harshness.

**Mistake Five: Finally, we tend to assume that the Soviets view international conflicts, particularly conflict between the U.S. and the USSR, in the same mental framework and perspective as we do.**

This is an error, but the complex question is even more complicated by the fact that, unlike our policy, Soviet interests are decided by some twenty members of the Politburo, to which one might add a handful of high military persons. Soviet policy thus is informed by a single view. About the thinking of the Russian people, or the people of the Soviet Union, we know nothing. For practical purposes it is as if ideas beyond the Politburo did not exist. What ideas there are are not articulated and, even if articulated, are not allowed public expression or influence.

In the United States, on the other hand, we decide policies in the midst of a deep division of opinions on armaments, attitudes toward the Soviet Union, and the very idea of peace. A considerable multitude of views are not merely articulated but given powerful dissemination by the media. In addition, our policy decisions involve not merely two parties but also the Presidency and the



Congress as rivals of power, to the extent that, once made, our policy decisions continue to be questioned, unmade, and even sabotaged. Therefore it is impossible to make an unambiguous statement about our ideas on foreign policy.

Apart from that, comparing our ideas with those of the Soviets makes sense only if one traces either all the way to the "vanishing point" of the perspective, *i.e.*, to the ultimate beliefs beyond more immediate concepts. These furthest reaches of the human mind may not be conscious to many people even though they are present as unspoken assumptions and unprovable premises about being. Today, thinking about being is so utterly out of fashion that most people would not even grasp questions about being. That also goes for the Soviets who, after all, are completely steeped in one of the varieties of modern Western thought. As they have it, history has totally replaced being. Their ideology says history is a process of class struggle, that "the class struggle" has narrowed down to a fight between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and that in our days the proletarian revolution, already accomplished in Russia, will achieve the complete overthrow of the bourgeoisie, thereby ending the class struggle. Until then, for Communists, life is nothing but struggle, a struggle waged with a great variety of methods but a single determination. Military force is by no means the Communists' preferred method. They are deeply persuaded that the class struggle is a political struggle, because class power has tenacious roots not only in social institutions but also in people's habits. The great experience of the Russian Communists was not so much the revolution but the collectivization of the peasantry, an undertaking which, as Stalin admitted to Churchill, was infinitely more dangerous than World War II. Small detachments of the party went into villages, threatening, persuading, prodding, ultimately shooting, arresting, and deporting. Victory was long in coming and was not considered attained until the party was esconced in positions of local strength in each city, village, and region.

Soviet thinking on international wars moves likewise in this framework and this perspective. Military victory alone would mean little if it consisted in nothing more than removing the enemy's military strength while leaving intact the fiber of a resisting society. Social and cultural resistance can be overcome only by political and social penetration. Thus the Soviet mind cannot separate military war from political conflict. All military objectives are necessarily also political objectives, and vice versa. "Vice versa" means that the process of political conquest, in which "persuasion" plays a great role, also admits of irresistible force as an element of persuasion.

One should take another look at Khrushchev's speech of January 6, 1961. He stated that the Soviets were not interested in "world wars," *i.e.*, in nuclear wars, or such "local wars" as were likely to lead to world wars; that, however, they were "vitally interested" in "national liberation wars" and "popular uprisings." The model of

a "national liberation war" is Vietnam, Angola, or Namibia; the model of a "popular uprising" is Cuba, Chile, or Nicaragua. The reason for this Communist preference is the admixture of strong political and moral emotions in these two kinds of "war." It is, by the way, worth noticing that Khrushchev included "popular uprisings" in the category of "wars." We ourselves have experienced the immense power of such an uprising in the case of the anti-war currents generated by Vietnam, emotional waves that defeated our side even though our troops were never vanquished.

**The perspective of Soviet thinking has as its vanishing point the ultimate victory of the proletarian revolution, supposedly ordained by history.** Moving slowly from this vanishing point toward the foreground, the next assumption, still pretty far back, is Lenin's postulate that wars are generated exclusively by capitalist states seeking to "distribute and redistribute" the world among them. That makes all socialist regimes, by definition, "peace-loving." Again, on Lenin's teaching, these socialist states must be more strongly armed than their capitalist enemies. In addition to their armed strength, however, they must mount a vigorous propaganda campaign for peace and total disarmament. They must oppose any war in which capitalist states are involved as an "imperialist war," this opposition extending to military action passed off as necessary to overthrow "imperialism," the sole source of all wars. Thus the Soviet Union has rapidly increased its nuclear armaments, conventional armaments, its three-ocean navy while preaching disarmament, world peace, and peaceful co-existence.

In the perspective of a pre-ordained victory of the proletarian revolution, the Soviet military have taken the line that a nuclear war can be won. They envisage a war lasting only a few days, and they mean to emerge triumphant. Their energetically pursued civil defense program shows that this is no mere brave talk. Still, all this does not necessarily add up to a Communist preference for nuclear war. After all, even a victorious nuclear war cannot give them the political power they are seeking.

If one places nuclear war and the threat of it in a political perimeter, one can see the Soviet Union gobbling up decisive chunks of political geography by political maneuvers which would always include strong indigenous pro-Communist elements. Those elements could be won for the Communist cause either by the appeal of socialist ideas, or by the desire for nuclear disarmament, or the sympathy for the liberation of colonial peoples, or an all-consuming fear of nuclear war. In its Program of 1961, the CPSU has clearly stated that they expect Communist parties in capitalist states to move into parliamentary positions of strength, in alliance with such sympathizers, the alliance having sufficient power to effect, by laws, a "peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism." (*The Communist Blueprint for the Future*, Dutton 1962, 138) That is their concept of a full measure of victory.

Still further toward the foreground, the Soviets will pursue policies of inciting conflicts between elements of the Third World and the leading Western countries, chiefly the USA, as well as varieties of negotiations designed to "unmask" the militarism and imperialism of the West. As one of their diplomats said: "We are neither philanthropists nor fools." Western civility or even manifestations of sympathy do not move them but are seen as opportunities to score advances. The one givenness in their minds is the long-range socialist victory.

If we now examine our way of thinking about international conflict, we can discover neither a concept of being, nor any strong conviction regarding an ultimate goal of history. Still, with us, too, history has replaced being, but of history's direction we profess little knowledge beyond our general impression that it is progressive, especially in what concerns war.

Woodrow Wilson's idea that we can bring about a "world without war" chiefly by conducting ourselves as if this world were already a reality, has left a lasting mark on the American mind. American statesmen love to use terminology like "world peace," "enduring peace," "just peace," "peace in our time." A part of this mentality is the illusion that the road to peace consists of a series of pacts, each pact a definite step forward, the entire series amounting to the abolition of war.

The Soviet focus on an ultimate socialist victory ordained by history is certainly a source of irrationality. All the same, in matters of day-by-day action the Soviet mind, focusing on hard realities of power, can be called realistic. By contrast, we seem to confuse feelings with reality. *The Day After*, for example, is becoming rapidly a symbol that substitutes for reality. The sentiment of exclusive horror feeds on a fictional presentation of what might be, the horror so far surpassing every other sentiment that the imagination sees but one evil, and the will aims at nothing but the avoidance of this one evil.

From there, it is but a little step to the conclusion that, there being only one evil, this evil must affect the Russians as it does us. Thus, the Cuban crisis of 1962 is described as the moment when Kennedy and Khrushchev together "looked into the abyss," which common experience supposedly resulted in a continuing community between the two men who had harshly confronted each other less than a year before. One perceives something like this going on in the mind of President Kennedy, for on June 10, 1963, seven months after the Cuba crisis, he

delivered the so-called "American University Speech" in which he spoke of "peace for all peoples," and included the Soviet Union in the ranks of "peace-loving nations."

Thus the vanishing point of our perspective seems to be a basic community of interests between the Soviet Union and the United States. If one moves from this vanishing point toward the foreground, one arrives at the analysis of "undue provocation" as the cause of Soviet armaments and creation of new conflict zones all over the world. Here also, is the place of *detente*, not so much because of its concept but because of the chiefly psychological "substance" of the policy. Here also belongs the so-called Sonnenfeldt doctrine which says that we ought to avoid anything that might exacerbate the relation between the Soviet Union and its East European satellites, lest we drive the Soviet leaders into a needless state of fear. Further, one ought to mention Marshal Shulman, director of the Russian Institute at Columbia University, who envisions a radiant future when *detente* would lead to cooperation between the Soviet Union and the USA "in establishing a world order."

All this, and more, follows fairly logically from that exclusive horror of nuclear war to the point of ignoring every other evil. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his Harvard Commencement Address, his Templeton Address, and sundry other speeches has criticized the West for this, whereupon the liberals put him in the doghouse. Yet the gist of Solzhenitsyn's criticism is this: Turn back from your emotionalism, to a sound and sober morality through which you recognize those evils that threaten the human soul, human freedom, and the human mind, and you will regain a sense of reality by which you can discern the Soviets for what they are.

Misconceptions regarding the wooden horse and the determination of the Greeks caused the fall of Troy. Misconception, both about the human reality and the will of God, was governing the false prophets when they proclaimed to Judah "peace, peace," when there was no peace. And now, in our own time, misconceptions about the reality of Communism have caused disaster to both the Communists' allies and their enemies.

**Yet our strength as a society and a nation is such that we can say, soberly: In this world, the only force that can defeat us is possessed by us. Let it not become our downfall.**



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